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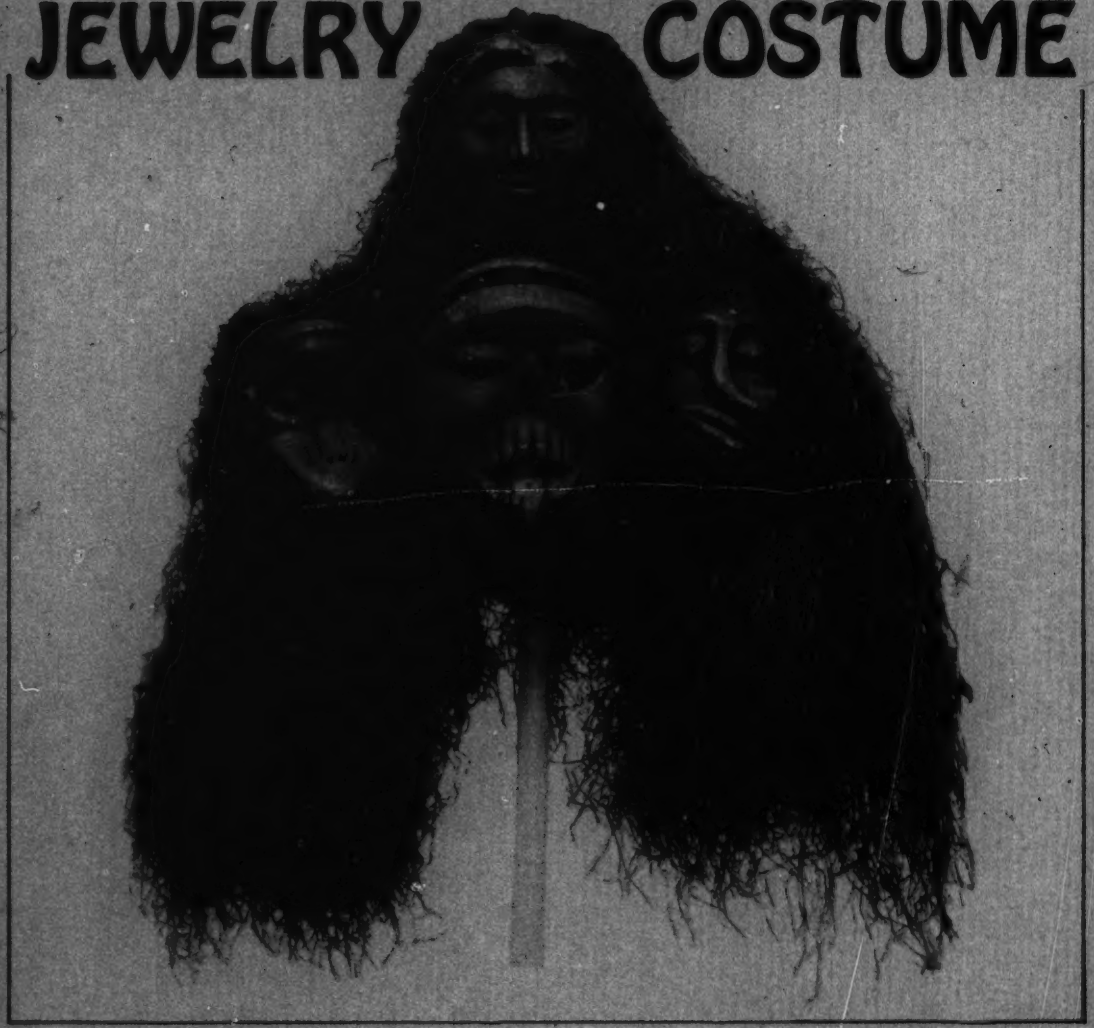
General

WEST AFRICAN VISION: WEAPONS, JEWELRY & COSTUME



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WEST AFRICAN VISION:

Weapons, Jewelry, Costume

An exhibition presented by the
Paul Klapper Library
on loan from
the Tribal Arts Gallery,
New York City

November 8 - December 3, 1971

ABOUT THE COVER

Deformity Group Mask. *Ibibio. Nigeria. 29"*
This is a very unusual combination of four types of masks in one composition. The masks are used by the Ekpo society, which concerns itself especially with the ancestor worship and healthful well-being of the people. The representation of two types of facial disease, especially the central positioning and large size of the face with the missing nose, denotes that the mask was used in rituals to expel disease from the community. The other mask types in this interesting grouping are a monkey-god face, a "bent-nose" face, and a normal human face above. The grotesque and frightening qualities of the mask are enhanced by the protruding tongue of the central face, its punched-out eye opening, and the profusion of dark fiber surrounding the faces.

The pieces in this exhibition are mostly from cultures of West Africa; some pieces from the Congo and North Africa are also included. Very often an individual piece can represent a whole tribe and its art style because the object is familiar to us and we associate it with a particular group. This is true of the Dogon Kanaga mask, the Ibo Maiden Spirit mask, and the Mende Bundu Helmet.

The original magical qualities imbued in these objects are not completely lost even though the objects are shown in an environment different from that for which they were originally made. These sculptures, costumes, and ceremonial implements were meant to be seen in action, accompanied by dance, music, and ritual. The jewelry and clothing are meant to be seen on the body, complementing it, making it more attractive. We have to remember too that most of these objects were originally meant to be seen only in the communities where they were made. Often, in the case of certain masks and sculptures, only a select group of people could be exposed to them. This can be explained by the original purpose of many of the costumes, sculptures, and masks: these are objects designed with spirit and ritual in mind. They are in a sense magical objects, made with a collaboration of tradition and invention. The magical qualities of the objects were manifested by their ability to influence people and events. In too many examples the original purpose and meaning of the pieces are no longer known, but the magical qualities, although weakened by cultural disuse of the objects, still reach out to us.

I would like to acknowledge with many thanks the help given me in compiling this catalog by Leonard Kahane and Albert Gordon, both of the Tribal Arts Gallery.

Items a-k in the exhibit, though not illustrated in this catalog, are described on page 23.

Miriam Hernández
Candidate for the M.A. in Art History

Egungun mask. *Yoruba. Dahomey.*
Enlarged section of photograph
described on page 2.

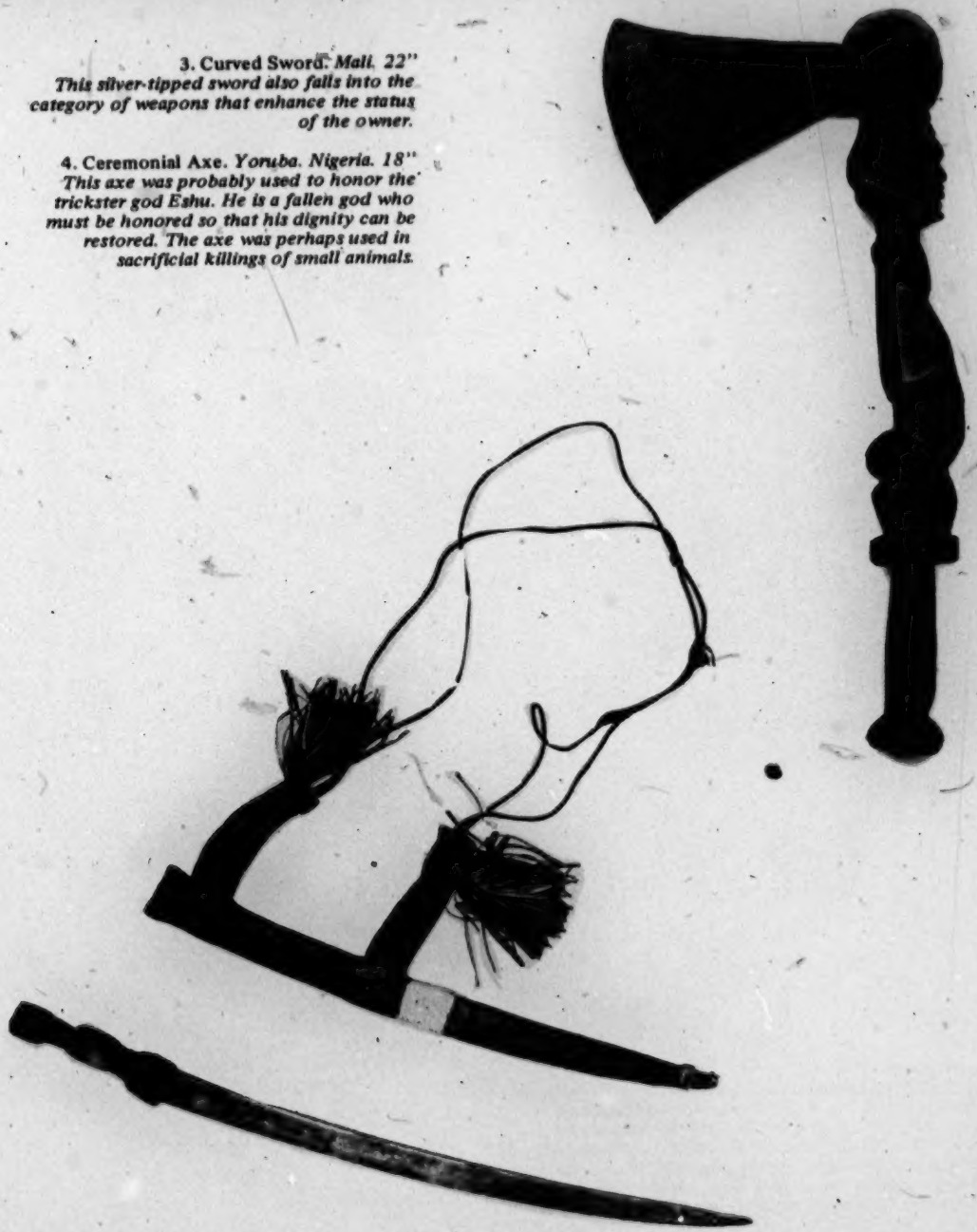
1. Achali Mask. *Ibo, Nigeria. 10½"*
White is the color most preferred by the Ibo for their masks. It is symbolic of the spirit world. Native chalk was once used for mask painting, but now blackboard chalk is used more extensively. This type of mask is worn by boys in the village of Afikpo during Christmas masquerade performances.

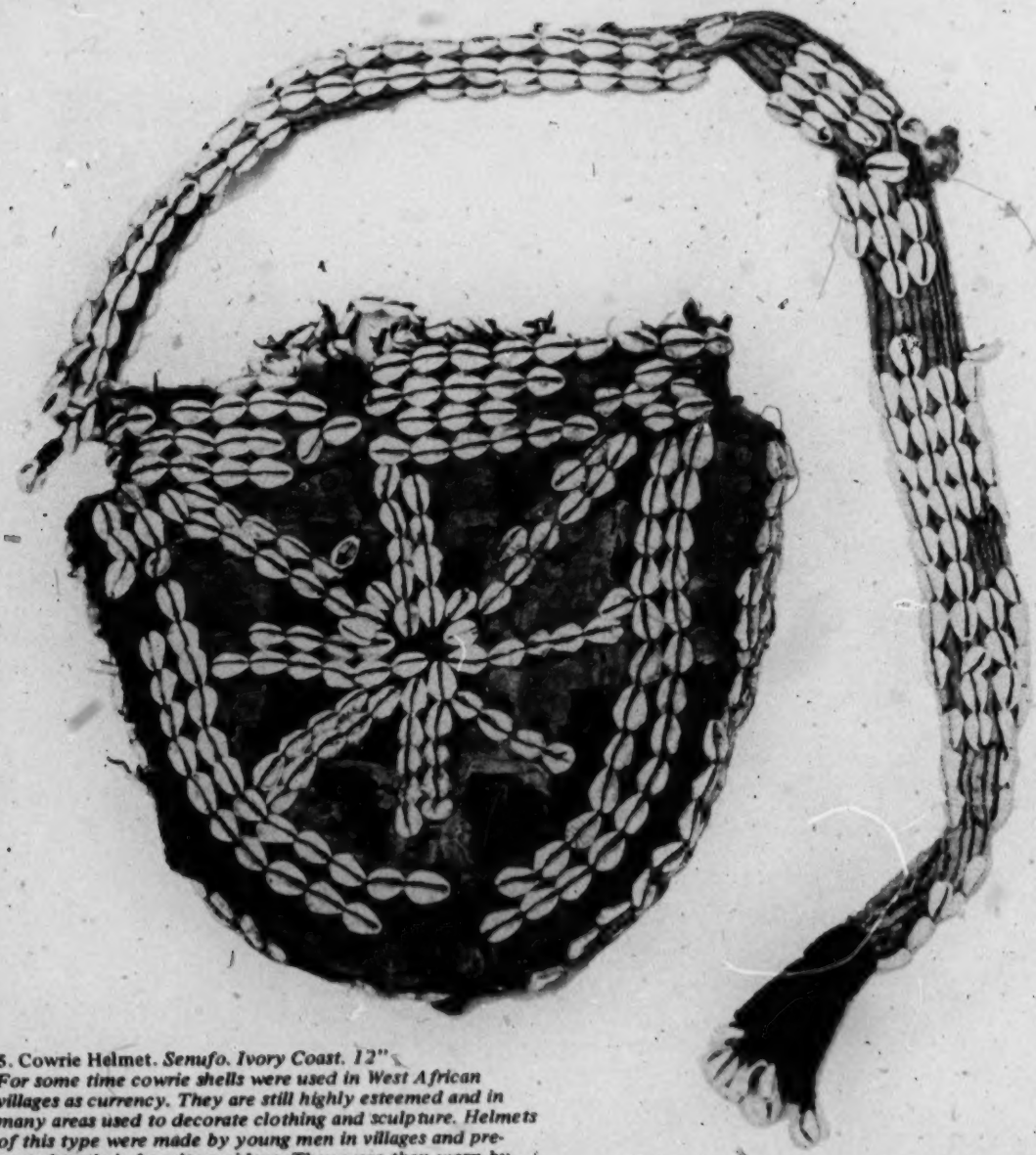
2. Egungun costume and mask. *Yoruba. Dahomey. 63"*
Years ago the Egungun cult members had the responsibility of finding and destroying human witches. They also appeared at the funeral of a member, and the dead man spoke through one of the members. The costume is made of long strips of colorful cloth. There is an open-weave piece at the top through which the masquerader can see.

2a. *The mask falls into a very recognizable style of the Yoruba, with its brightly painted surface, triangular chin area, almond-shaped eyes, and the characteristic "leopard's claw" markings on the cheeks.*

3. Curved Sword. *Mali. 22"*
This silver-tipped sword also falls into the category of weapons that enhance the status of the owner.

4. Ceremonial Axe. *Yoruba. Nigeria. 18"*
This axe was probably used to honor the trickster god Eshu. He is a fallen god who must be honored so that his dignity can be restored. The axe was perhaps used in sacrificial killings of small animals.





5. Cowrie Helmet. *Senufo. Ivory Coast. 12"*
For some time cowrie shells were used in West African villages as currency. They are still highly esteemed and in many areas used to decorate clothing and sculpture. Helmets of this type were made by young men in villages and presented to their favorite maidens. They were then worn by the young girls in a public ceremony.

6. Brass Armlet. *Cameroon.*
This is a cast piece which, although quite heavy, is worn as an object of beautification and prestige.

7. Helmet. *Bamum(?). Cameroon. 12"*
The wooden female figure on top most likely invokes fertility for the tribe. Bark has been stretched over the basketwork helmet.

8. Gelede Society Mask. ***Yoruba. Nigeria. 21"***
The Gelede society is concerned most with the appeasement of witches. This is done by entertaining them, which explains the puppet-like moveable figures atop this mask. The society also employs this type of mask to honor the death of an important member. This society does not limit its membership to men only, but includes old women, since old women are associated with witches.

9. Maiden Spirit Headdress. *Ibo. Nigeria. 19½"*
This headdress, to be worn attached to a cap or hat, is of the type used in performances for entertainment purposes. The headdress represents the beautiful and gentle Maiden Spirit. The use of white on the face and the elaborate superstructure are akin to the Maiden Spirit mask.

10. Monkey Mask. *Ibibio. Nigeria. 14"*
This mask has a combination of human and animal forms, with a large hinged jaw which allows the wearer to open and close it very dramatically and noisily during performances.

11. Mmwo. Maiden Spirit Mask. *Ibo. Nigeria. 19½"*
A male secret society member wears this mask in dances and pantomimes during agricultural or funeral ceremonies. The spirit represented is that of a woman, and it is the delicacy of the female which is pantomimed, along with such typical female activities as preening and haggling over prices. The masquerader also wears a colorful appliqued costume, with attached breasts, which contrasts with the starkness of the black and white face.

12. Bundu Society Helmet. *Mende. Sierra Leone. 15"*
The Bundu society, made up entirely of females, wears this type of mask during initiation ceremonies. The hairstyle and the "rolls of fat" on the neck area signify the wealth and beauty of a desirable woman. The costume which accompanies this mask is made of black fiber and covers the body completely. Shown above front view, below, side view.

13. Kanaga Mask. *Dogon. Mali. 37½"*
When an important member of the Awa society dies, the members perform a dance urging the spirit of the dead to leave the community. This is the mask worn during a funerary dance performed all through the village, the members even climbing on rooftops to perform. The exact symbolism of the cross-like structure above the mask is not known, although it has been interpreted as a bird in flight, the crocodile who helped the first Dogon settlers across a river, or the balance between heaven and earth.

14. Polychrome Mask. *Bateke. Congo. 15"*
This is one of the most unusual types of masks of the Congo area. Its two-dimensional abstract quality is emphasized by the flat geometric designs on its face. The mask is really three-dimensional: the semicircular piece serving as the forehead area protrudes slightly from the rest of the face. Fiber makes up its beard and feathers serve as the headdress.

15. Antelope Mask. *Bambara, Mali. 27".*
The Bambara are a primarily agricultural people. Their secret societies are mainly concerned with ensuring a good farming season and harvest. The antelope is directly connected with the beginning of the tribe and their first venture into agriculture, since he is supposed to have taught the people how to farm. (ILLUS. IS INVERTED)

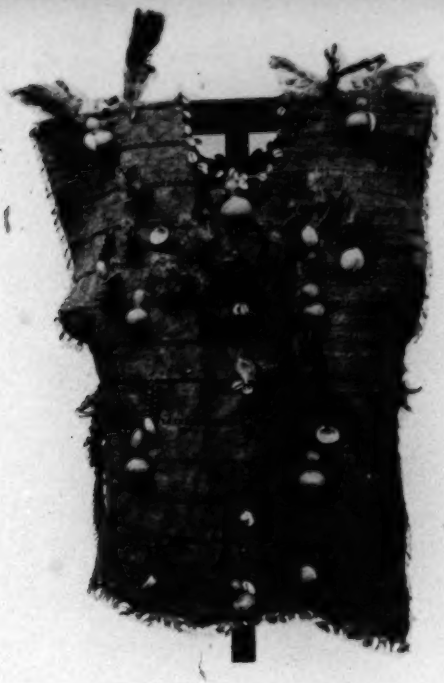
16. Bwami Society Mask. *Warega (Lega), Congo. 6½"*
The Bwami society has several stages of membership and opens its ranks to both the women and the men of the community. Masks of this type are used in initiation ceremonies to the second highest grade of the society. The mask is the property of a family group, and was usually carried to the ceremony by its fiber beard.

17. Leather Cape. *Ethiopian. 32"*
The beads decorating this cape enhance the beauty and value of this protective garment meant to be worn slung over one shoulder.

18. Mud Cloth Shirt. *Bambara. Mali. 24"*
The decoration of fabric has a long tradition with the Bambara. The process is long and tedious, involving aged dyes made from leaves and branches and a special mud which is painted on the cloth and allowed to set before it is washed. The cloth is prepared by women. Young girls are taught the ancient technique and designs at an early age and must serve years of apprenticeship before they become experts. There is a variety of patterns used, each having its own name.

19. Sack Costume. *Ivory Coast or Mali. 53"*
A red dye has been used to paint circular patterns on this costume. The pattern is interrupted by the drawing of stick figures. This is the type of costume used in the fire-spitter ceremony of the Senufo, a ceremony which is performed during initiation, agricultural, or funeral rites.

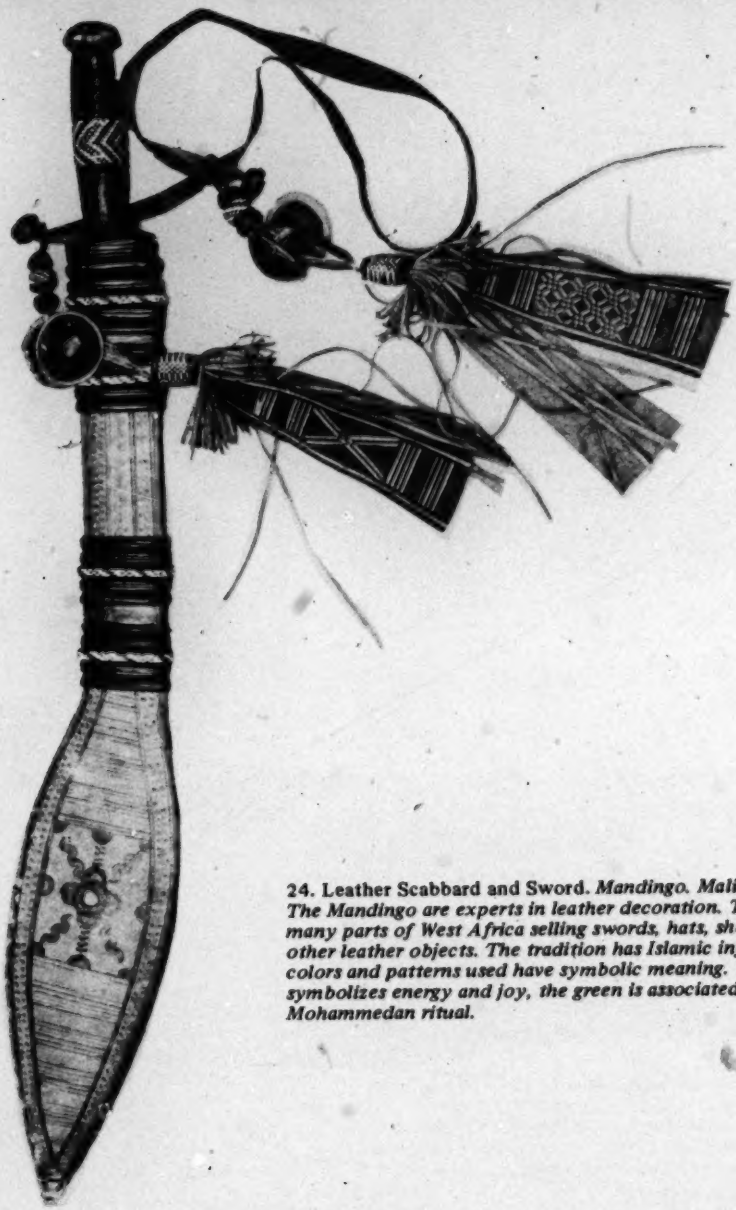
20. Metal Staff. *Baule(?). Ivory Coast. 37"*
This double-point staff is probably about 200 to 300 years old. The cloth covering the shaft is Baule, and the staff was probably used in ritualistic ceremonies.



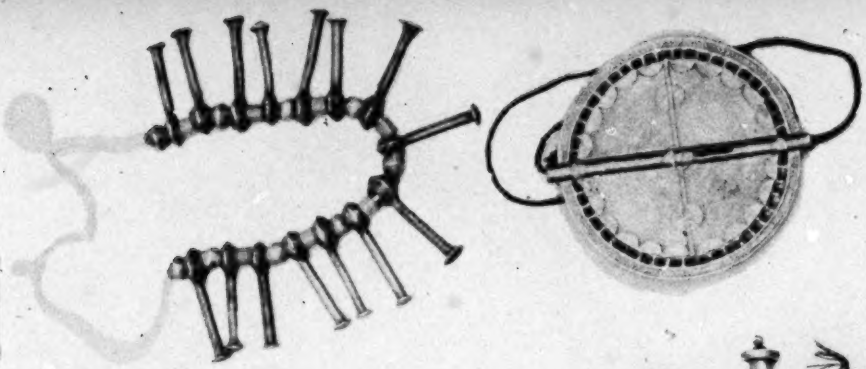
21. Fetisher's Costume. *Dahomey. 30"*
The addition of natural objects such as guinea hen feathers, shells, seeds, and small gourds to this costume is not really for decoration purposes. These are all materials associated with a fetisher, a person capable of performing seemingly magical, and very often medicinal, acts. The whole costume, with the exception of the feathers, has been dipped in a red dye.

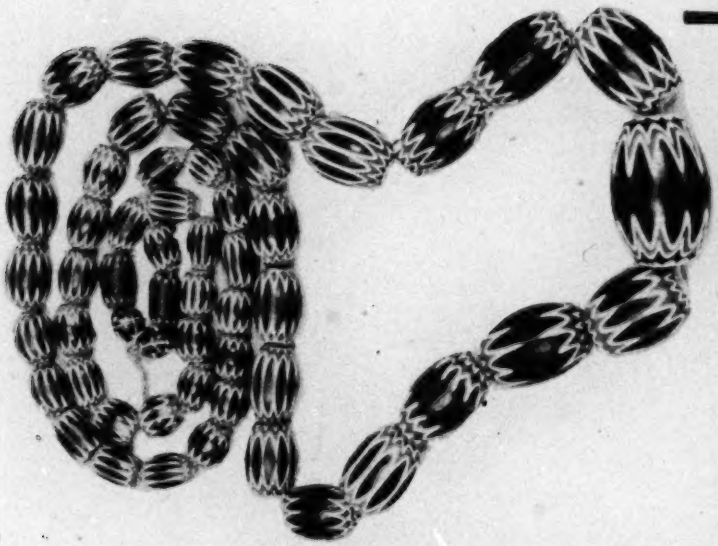
22. Wooden Sword. *Asante or Baule. Ghana or Ivory Coast. 37"*
For both of these peoples, who are descendants of the ancient Akan culture, the sword is a symbol of chieftaindom and even royalty. Swords such as this were held before seated chiefs during important ceremonial pageantry.

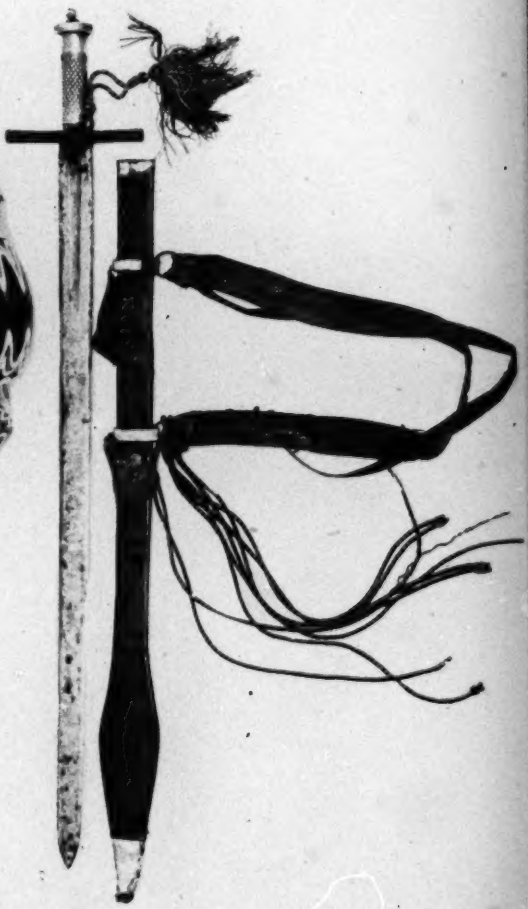
23. Ceremonial Axe. *Dahomey. 16"*
The finely worked detail of this axe is evidence of its symbolic use. It is an object to be seen, and not put to actual use in battle or ceremony.



24. Leather Scabbard and Sword. *Mandingo. Mali. 15"*
The Mandingo are experts in leather decoration. They travel through many parts of West Africa selling swords, hats, shoes, bags, and other leather objects. The tradition has Islamic influence and the colors and patterns used have symbolic meaning. The red dye symbolizes energy and joy, the green is associated with the Mohammedan ritual.





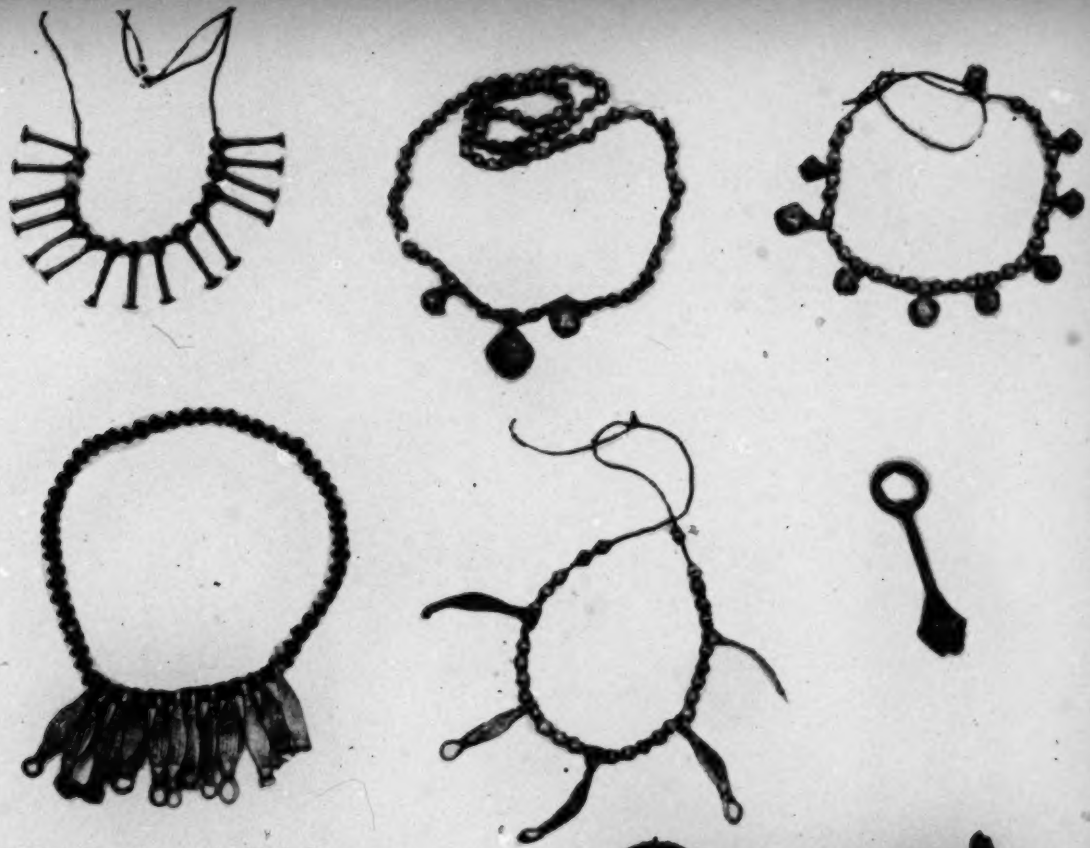


25. Kirdi Cache-Sexe Ornament, Glass Bead Necklace, "soul bearer" disk. *Cameroon and Ivory Coast.*
The cache-sexe ornament is of the nail-head type. The chevron design of the beads on the left is of Venetian origin. The beads are now made in Africa and this design is associated with the Cameroon area. The Baule brass casting is of the type worn by aides of the king when he travels.

26. Sword and Scabbard. *Mali. 13"*
This fancy and beautiful weapon was more of a status piece than an implement of violence. The sword indicated the wealth of its wearer.

27. Bronze Hoe. ***Cameroon.***
Groundbreaking ceremonies prior to sowing are very important in agricultural communities. This hoe has been used in such ceremonies, when it was necessary to perform a ritual with special implements to secure a good harvest.

28. Silver Pendant and Bracelet.
Fulani. Cameroon.
Silver Ear Pick on Chain. ***Ethiopia.***
The delicate silver work on the jewe shows Islamic influence. The tribe w produces these works is the tribe of President of Cameroon. The ear pick used by barbers in Ethiopia, on custo who request a little extra grooming.



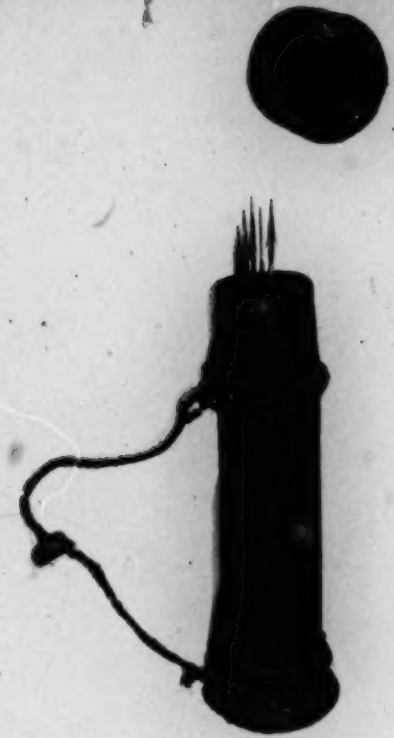
29. Cache-Sexe Ornaments. *Kirdi. Cameroon. Bronze-cast ornaments like these are still used by Kirdi women in the hinterland, although they have been outlawed by the government. They are worn around the hips, barely covering the pubic area, with each type of design having its own meaning. The banana-leaf design on the lower left and center signifies menstruation.*

30. Knife and Scabbard. *Bamum. Cameroon. 22"*
A harmless knife is concealed by an elaborate leatherwork scabbard. It is the type of showpiece to be worn to the mosque as a symbol of the owner's wealth.

31. Beaded costume. *Bamileke. Cameroon. 60"*
The use of small beads was originally reserved for the king and his court, but now the Bamileke are well known for their use of small beads to decorate their sculptures and costumes. This costume, known as "the elephant," is made of beads intricately sewn in a geometric pattern. The head shows a face with two round forms, the ears of the elephant, projecting on either side.

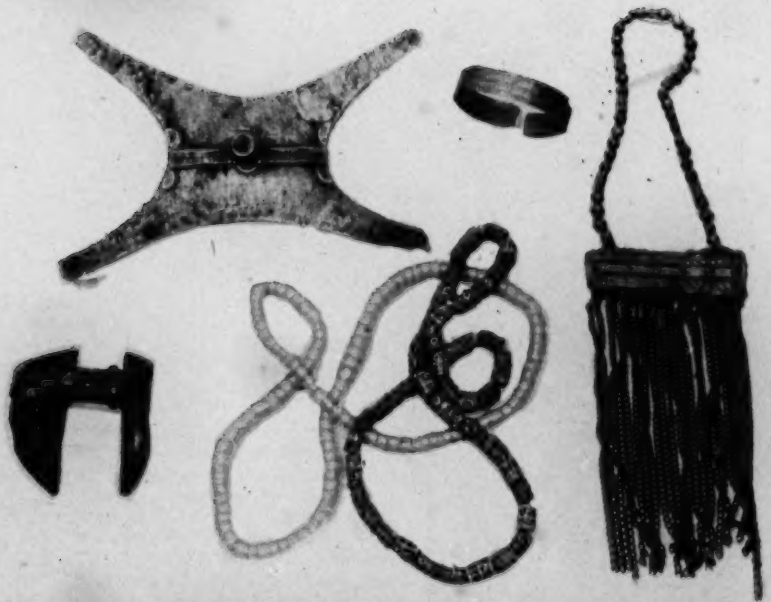
The upper part of the costume, seen here from the top, shows the precision of the placement of the beads. Not visible in the photo is the interruption of one black bead in a pattern of white beads, which is meant to break any evil spell which might exist if the pattern was perfect.

32. Hunter's Cap. *Senufo(?). Ivory Coast. 9"*
Some of the ornaments of this cap have been lost, although the elaborate decoration is still visible. This is a cap worn by a hunter in the ceremony performed prior to the actual hunt.



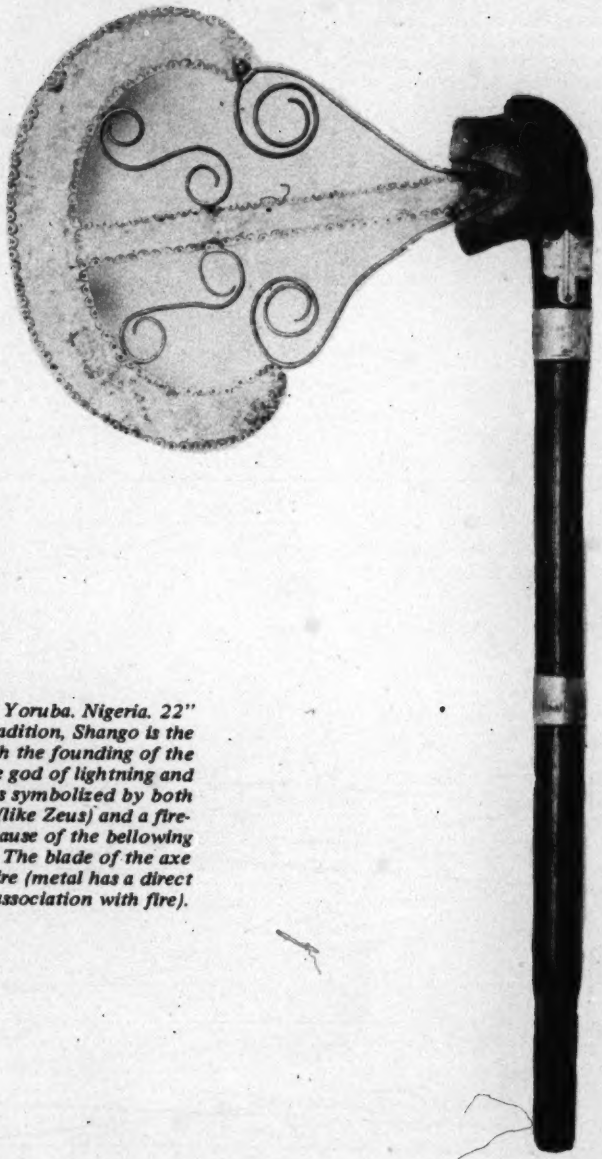
33. Quiver and Arrows. *Ivory Coast. 19½"*
The arrows in the quiver were highly valued by its owner. They were forged in metal by hand. The quiver is of a basketwork with leather covering.

34. Metal Ornaments and Glass Beads. *Cameroon.*
On the top left is a breastplate ornament of the Kirdi people. To the right of it and below left are two bracelets. On the extreme right is another type of Kirdi cache-sexe ornament, this one made of many tiny chains. The clear glass beads have been made from bottles; the other beads are of the Venetian glass type, first imported from Europe as trade items, now made in areas of West Africa.



35. Brass Ornaments. *Cameroon.*
Pendant and Chain. *Ethiopia.*
On the bottom is a brass-cast horn, probably used to hold fetish material, or perhaps just tobacco. The pipe in the lower left is also cast in brass. Between the horn and the pipe is a bell, used to announce community events. The bracelets shown are in four types. In the center, near the bell, is a Kirdi cache-sexe ornament. Under the top row of bracelets is a Coptic-influenced pendant on a chain.

36. Yoruba Beaded Crown. ***Nigeria. 11"***
Beaded crowns have royal and divine associations for the Yoruba. Beads were chosen by the gods as their symbol; the kings are descendants of the gods. The face on the front of the crown is the face of the ancestor king, who is brought to life through the living king.



37. Shango Axe. ***Yoruba. Nigeria. 22"***
In the Yoruba tradition, Shango is the deity associated with the founding of the nation. He is the god of lightning and thunder, so he is symbolized by both a double axe (like Zeus) and a fire-spitting ram—because of the bellowing sound of thunder. The blade of the axe stands for the fire (metal has a direct association with fire).

The following items a-k are part of the exhibit but are not illustrated in this catalog.

a. Feather Headdress. *Cameroon. 12"*
The most interesting aspect of this piece is the way it has been designed to fold up inside out, with the woven cap protecting the feathers when the headdress is not in use. The feathers have been dyed magenta. The tips of the feathers have been folded through the weave, then sewn.

b. Beaded Cap. *Bakuba. 6"*
The swirling arrangement of beads makes this otherwise simple cap into a very decorative and attractive article.

c. Ceremonial Sword. *Bini. Nigeria. 26½"*
The Bini are the descendants of the ancient kingdom of Benin. The influence of the old style is visible in the head of the sword's handle. Especially characteristic are the ornate bands running from the corners of the mouth to the ears.

d. Ceremonial Axe. *Dahomey or Nigeria. 13"*
This wooden-handled axe is of the type used to slaughter sacrificial animals.

e. Ceremonial Knife. *Bakuba(?). Congo. 18½"*
This broad-bladed knife with its studded handle is probably a symbol of the power and authority of a chief.

f1. Necklace with interlocking beads. *Dahomey.*
The yellow and blue interlocking beads which make up most of the necklace are most likely of European origin. There are also chevron glass beads and beads with polka dots. Both of these types were originally European in origin, but are now also made in Africa.

f2. Silver Pendant and Chain. *Cameroon.*
The ornament for the chain is made of very thin strips of silver.

f3. Glass Beads. *West African.*
This kind of bead, with the thin blue and brown stripes, is of African origin. These beads can be found from Liberia through Nigeria and Cameroon.

g. Cache-Sexe Ornaments. *Kirdi. Cameroon.*
The beads and ornaments are cast in bronze. There are three types: the bell ornament, the nail-head ornament, and the ring ornament.

h1. Bronze Castings. *West Africa.*
Several cultures are represented by the rings. There is an Asante chameleon-symbol of immortality; a Dogon ring with breasts—symbol of fertility; two Bobo rings—one with an antelope head, the other with a buffalo head; and others.

h2. *The cast-brass bracelet and the two cache-sexe ornaments are from Cameroon. One is of the pointed-rings type, the other of the bell type.*

i(1) Cache-Sexe Ornament. *Kirdi. Cameroon.*
This is of the bell type.

i(2) Brass Safe Container. *Cameroon.*
This purse-like container is used by men to hold coins and other valuables. There is a flap which, although a bit difficult to move, can be opened and closed. The cowries attached to the rings on the bottom add to the beauty and value of the purse.

i(3) Agate Beads. *Cameroon.*
These beads were acquired in Saudi Arabia by a Moslem who had made a trip to Mecca. They were worn as a symbol of prestige.

j. Feather Costume. *Bamum. Cameroon. 80"*
This full-length costume is entirely made up of dyed feathers and the woven material to which they are attached.

k. Beaded Cap. *Yoruba. Nigeria. 5½"*
The face on this cap had been beaded on upside down. The overall decoration of this piece is a simplified and smaller version of the Yoruba beaded crown.

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